

Shrinkdown Program Helps Employees Practice What They Preach

Issue

As public health professionals, we understand the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle. However, it was clear that staff at S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Region 8 were not leading by example. The staff didn't have to look very far to find an appropriate group for a pilot healthy living program.

Poor eating habits and lack of physical activity are major factors that lead to being overweight and developing chronic health conditions. The adverse effects of these factors can be seen in absenteeism from the job, which translates into decreased productivity. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity is fast approaching smoking as the leading cause of preventable deaths in the United States. Overweight and obesity rates in South Carolina are among the highest in the nation.

Intervention

There exists a great need within Region 8 for an intervention that combats these very issues. Worksite wellness is one element of the environmental and policy systems change process, so it was decided to create an internal "healthy living" program, and then replicate it throughout the Region. Over a twelve-week period, 50 Region 8 DHEC staff participated in the "Shrinkdown Challenge," which represents approximately one third of the entire staff. This initiative became a way of promoting and modeling healthy lifestyles. The following strategies were used for the internal pilot program:

- Formed staff teams;
- Developed and implemented strategies to address healthy eating and physical activity;
- Conducted weekly weigh-ins for participants;
- Generated weekly electronic information for participants; and
- Encouraged information sharing among participants and their family and friends.

Impact

As a result of the Shrinkdown Challenge, participating staff have made conscientious decisions to not only participate in the process, but to make lifestyle changes. Staff are not only 275 pounds lighter, but are healthier too! This can be seen through a change in food choices, being more disciplined about physical activity, as well as other positive effects of the healthy change process. The Region's Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant (PHHSBG) supported staff and others are continually providing education to the public about healthy living and the benefits of making smart choices related to physical activity and good nutrition; by "walking the walk" and taking the public health message one step further in improving the lives of clients. Other outcomes of this program include:

- Served as healthy, positive role models to the public;
- Increased team work and camaraderie;
- Increased energy and productivity;
- Improved eating habits of staff and family members;
- Increased staff morale and self-esteem;
- Developed a model program which reflects the Agency's ability to "practice what we preach" and enhance current local PHHSBG activities; and
- Provided an example for replication of the "Shrinkdown Challenge" within Region 8 using piloted PHHSBG supported interventions targeting schools and other worksites.

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